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Mr Lloyd Cutler
The White House
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr Cutler:

You do not know me but I am writing you because you have access to the President and what I have to say requires his personal consideration. If I address him directly it will go to some aide who may not appreciate its full importance.

These are my credentials: I am recognized as one of the few "experts" on Afghanistan in this country. For more than 25 years I have closely studied Afghan affairs. I have lived in Afghanistan on three extended occasions, once as a U.S. diplomat and twice as a Fulbright fellow and professor. I have written extensively on Afghan affairs in scholarly publications and am the author of a book, Reform and Rebellion in Afghanistan, published by Cornell University Press. At the moment I am writing a history of Afghan-American relations.

The recent Soviet invasion has finally forced Americans to focus on Afghanistan. Since we established our embassy in Kabul in 1942 the United States has paid little heed to that far-off Islamic country just as we largely ignored Viet Nam before 1952. We have blithely disregarded the critical geopolitical and strategic position of Afghanistan as the traditional invasion route for Central Asian powers seeking to dominate the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent.

When the British were in India and the Middle East they understood the importance of Afghanistan and fought three wars to keep that country out of Russian hands. Now the Soviets, taking advantage of our preoccupation with Iran and the temporary political weakness of Pakistan and India, are fulfilling a 200-year old dream of breaking out of their landlocked position and reaching out toward the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf.

The Soviets should not be permitted to swallow Afghanistan unchallenged. Oral chastisement by the United States or the United Nations is useless. The Soviets will pay no more attention to that than they did to world criticism of their invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. If the price to the Soviets of unprovoked aggression is no higher than this, we can expect the long-term repercussions in the area to be disastrous to American interests and security. All the nations in the region, including Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, India and Saudi Arabia will feel their vulnerability to a Soviet-inspired coup backed up by the threat of a military invasion. They will conclude that their only hope of survival depends on an accommodation to the Soviet will and a loosening of ties to the West.

The invasion of Afghanistan is thus not just another Soviet adventurist tactic on the periphery of American security interests such as occurred in Angola and Ethiopia, but rather a critical turning point in geopolitical history. It is more like the Nazi moves into the Rhineland and the Sudetenland - occasions on which firm opposition could have avoided a disastrous world war.

But what can the United States do about it? Afghanistan is too remote and inaccessible to even contemplate a direct American military response. Well, fortune has favored us in this case if we are wise and bold enough to seize the opportunity. The Afghan population is overwhelmingly opposed to the Soviet takeover and its puppet government. For a year and a half Muslim opponents of the Marxist pro-Soviet regimes of Mohammed Taraki and Hafizullah Amin have been in open rebellion. They would probably have won except for the interposition of Soviet military support. These Muslim patriots are just as firmly opposed to the new Soviet Quisling regime of Babrak Karmal. For over a year the freedom fighters have been asking for American assistance. We have thus far ignored their pleas because we did not want to intervene in a civil war and we hoped to induce a similar restraint by the USSR. But now the gloves are off and the naked iron fist of direct Soviet military invasion is visible to all. We are now free to respond to the unwarranted Soviet escalation by extending, directly or indirectly, financial and/or military help to the Afghan freedom fighters. The Soviets have been accusing us in any case of doing this. Now we can do so with a clear conscience.

The advantages of this course of action are many. The Afghans are fine guerrilla fighters. With adequate weapons they could pin down the Soviets for years. They may not be able to win but they would be very difficult to defeat. The Soviets would have to pay a high price for cynical seizure of this independent country. We can help to make this a Soviet Viet Nam. In addition our encouragement and aid to this popular resistance movement will bolster morale in other nations in the area and for once we will be on the popular side of a cause rather than propping up an unpopular regime. Finally and most importantly, we will be supporting a group of Muslim warriors against a Godless invasion and tyranny. The benefits of this stance to us in the entire Islamic world are incalculable. We should associate as many Islamic and other countries as possible with us in this effort.

This is an opportunity that must be seized quickly. It will not come again. To develop the modus operandi will require direct Presidential leadership to cut through bureaucracy and red tape. There are many difficulties and obstacles but it can be done if there exists the will to do it. If we wait until the Soviets have clamped an iron hold on the country and the opposition is decimated it will be too late. Then eventually we may have to commit our own military forces to stop the Soviet drive in a region where our vital interests are at stake. By seizing this small opportunity now we may be avoiding World War III.

Sincerely yours,


Leon B. Poullada

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